

The Army Makes a Bold Shift: Improving Reserve Training

What the Reserve Components (RC) can do and how ready they are to do it have long concerned those charged with the nation's security. Many believe that future conflicts may demand greater responsiveness, particularly from combat units. After the Persian Gulf War the Army initiated a pilot program—dubbed Bold Shift—to improve the training of high-priority RC units. Researchers from the RAND Arroyo Center analyzed the activities and performance of the pilot units, focusing on seven combat brigades. They found that the intensive training—unique in the peacetime history of the reserves—was widely accepted and generally effective for the units and reservists who participated. However, several features of the reserves limit what units can sustain, pointing to the need for a considerable period of postmobilization training.

THE BOLD SHIFT TRAINING PROGRAM

The revised training approach did indeed mark a bold shift for the Army. It redirected the training goals from achieving proficiency across all echelons to concentrating on lower ones—platoons and crews—and using more focused training events. Additionally, the Active Army devoted an average of 22,000 person-years to support the combat brigades' Annual Training (AT) events. The aim was to build a basic level of proficiency into lower-echelon units and their leaders, to serve as a foundation for postmobilization training.

PROGRAM RESULTS

The Bold Shift reforms succeeded along a number of dimensions. They were widely applauded by RC members in surveys that Arroyo Center researchers administered to over 12,000 RC personnel. Figure 1 illustrates Annual Training results. The left bar shows that 96 percent of the RC unit leaders rated the training as "effective." Moreover, as shown by the next two bars, the majority of Bradley Fighting Vehicle and tank crews who

attempted gunnery attained full qualification—a notable achievement given that they had to advance through several firing exercises and got little opportunity to practice gunnery during weekend drills preceding AT.

However, the AT results also pointed up enduring limitations in what RC combat units can accomplish during the time they have. One limitation is the scope of training: Most battalions, for example, focused on either gunnery or maneuver training, not both. Within maneuver training, several tasks were often omitted (e.g., night firing or dismounted drills). Given the limited time at AT and weekend drills, units often had to choose one task to the exclusion of others.

Perhaps most important, as shown by the rightmost bar in Figure 1: Only about two-thirds of unit members participated in AT. Rather than attending AT, some soldiers used their two weeks of summer training to complete skill-qualification or leader development courses required for their position. These absences, unfortunately, undercut collective training. Many crews were simply not present, and many others were composite crews cobbled together from pieces of several. During a mobilization, such crews would not remain together, and all of the missing crews

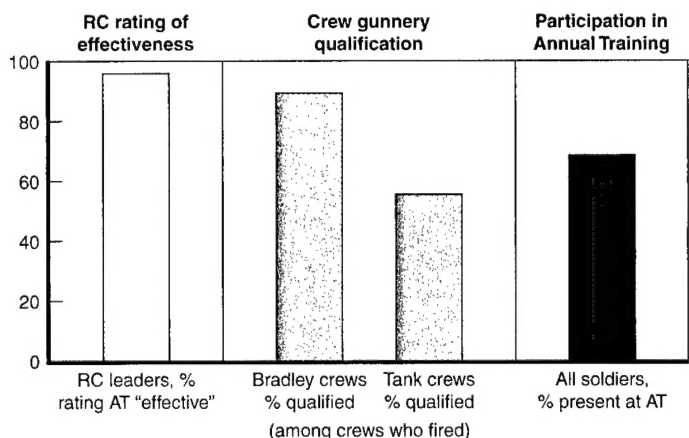


Figure 1—Annual Training Results

would have to be trained in their essential tasks. Therefore, any postmobilization program will have to include an initial phase to qualify many crews and platoons.

PERSONNEL TURBULENCE

The results also highlight individual qualification and personnel turbulence as enduring problems that need to be tackled. Figure 2 illustrates these twin, interrelated phenomena. The three bars at the left indicate the qualification challenges faced by RC units. In this case, only 74 percent of enlisted soldiers were qualified for their military occupational specialty (MOS)—a typical rate that has persisted over many years in the RC.

Many unit leaders also needed professional military education for their position. As Figure 2 shows, only 35 percent of NCOs (E-6s and E-7s) had completed the NCO course for their level, normally a prerequisite for a leadership job. Only 65 percent of the captains had completed the captains course, which trains essential skills for company command.

These shortfalls explain why many soldiers must attend school instead of participating in AT with their unit. What factors drive this situation? A key factor, as illustrated in the right half of Figure 2, is personnel turbulence. Turbulence results from soldiers leaving the unit (attrition) or moving between jobs within the unit. For example, the brigades' official readiness reports indicated that over the year they lost 27 percent of their soldiers. The new soldiers recruited to replace attrition losses must then be sent to school and cannot deploy until they become qualified in their MOS.

Similarly, soldiers who move between units or positions often have to be retrained in a new military skill. The rightmost bar in Figure 2 illustrates this: Fully 61 percent of the tank crews had changed their commander-gunner combination during the year preceding AT. Each of these crews would have to requalify on gunnery before deployment.

IMPROVING PREMOBILIZATION READINESS

Personnel readiness is key to premobilization readiness, and to achieve it the problem of turbulence must be addressed. Solutions could include incentives to keep

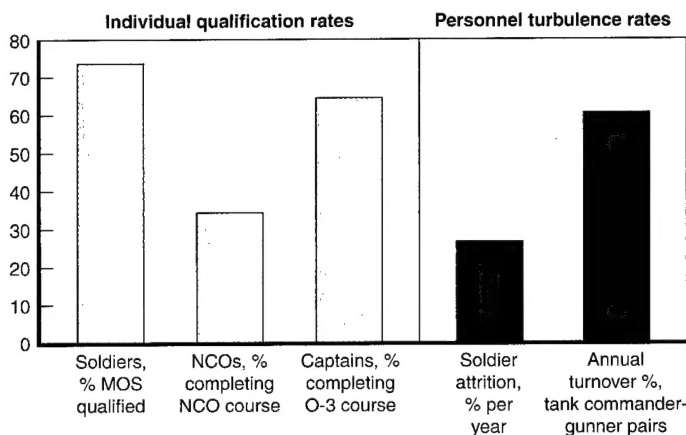


Figure 2—Personnel Readiness

people in the RC and to remain within the same unit. Since soldiers frequently switch jobs to enhance their promotion chances, the Army might alter policy to allow pay increases without promotion. It could also pay more soldiers to attend skill-qualifying courses during periods other than AT. Many soldiers declared in the survey that they would be willing to attend such additional-duty courses, if compensated.

The other key to success is efficiency in use of time, particularly at weekend drills. Weekend drill periods account for half the available training time, but RC members viewed drills as unproductive. One way of making the unit more efficient would be to add full-time support personnel. Full-timers play an essential role in planning weekend training and allowing RC commanders to focus on training. In addition, units need ready access to equipment and training areas to make good use of their scarce weekend drill time. For example, the Army might provide travel funds to fly units periodically to training areas and improved simulations to use during the interim periods.

Overall, these results emphasize that the reserve system places a heavy burden on the acquisition and sustainment of difficult soldier skills. Given the basic features of reserve service—modest amounts of training time, split into infrequent training periods—units need considerable support, more stability, and the resources to achieve greater time efficiency if they are to be ready to respond when the nation calls.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. The research summarized in this brief was carried out in the RAND Arroyo Center; it is documented in Training Readiness in the Army Reserve Components, by Ronald E. Sortor et al., MR-474-A, 1994, 140 pp., \$15.00, ISBN: 0-8330-1586-9, available from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: toll free 877-584-8642; FAX: 310-451-6915; or e-mail: order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). Arroyo Center URL: <http://www.rand.org/organization/ard/>. Publications are distributed to the trade by NBN. RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

RAND

1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, California 90407-2138 • Telephone 310-393-0411 • FAX 310-393-4818
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, Virginia 22202-5050 • Telephone 703-413-1100 • FAX 703-413-8111

RB-3019-A (2001)